

Lights! Camera! Dachshund!

Greyhounds aren't the only racing canines, as Shane MacDougall reveals in his Spellbound-meets-Best in Show "documentary" Wiener Takes All.

by Carsten Knox
The Coast, Halifax



Low down tricks. Sausages! Sausages! Sausages! (click for larger version)

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A wiener dog. Picture, if you will, the furry little face and astonishing joie de vivre. There are few things in life more immediately charming as the inimitable dachshund.

And, guess what? People race them.

Filmmaker and multiple-cat owner Shane MacDougall knew nothing about the growing sport of wiener dog racing when he had his first four-legged inspiration watching a news clip about it on television. "It was a moment of clarity," he says. "I said, 'Geez, someone should do a documentary about this and they should call it Wiener Takes All.' It was around the time Spellbound came out. Not to say this is a Spellbound rip-off but, hell, its kind of a Spellbound rip-off."

The 40-year-old director, a PEI native and TUNS grad, in California when reached for this story, is prepping his second documentary, called A-Holes: A Scientific Study of Jerks. "We're trying to answer the age-old question: Are jerks born that way? Nurture or nature? And Hollywood, you know, is the epicentre of a-holes."

A reasonable claim, which might explain why for his first documentary, er, "dogumentary," MacDougall travelled to less glam locales in rural areas of the United States to investigate the friendly wiener dogs and a few of their 75 major annual competitive events. The film tracks the fame, fortune and careers of a number of short-in-stature but gigantic-in-spirit canines—Noodle, Pretzel, Baron, Heidi and others—in the Southern California wiener dog racing circuit. Of course, the film spends some time with the brown bullets' humans as well, to a person the model of American suburban enthusiasm, their very identities tied up in the speedy success or failure of their pets. Very Best In Show, except, you know, real.

"Well that's it, you can't write anything as funny as reality," says MacDougall, when Christopher Guest's dog-show satire—and MacDougall is a fan—is brought up. "Who knew there are wiener dog syndicates? You gotta be kidding me. It is a cutthroat, expensive sport. A hundred grand to show a wiener dog? And to have its own press agent?"

What started in MacDougall's mind as a straight look at the history and phenomenon of racing dachshunds expands as the film goes on, to reveal other doggie distractions such as canine weddings ("Muttrimony") and the more blue-blooded world of New York's Westminster Dog Show. And where there is a passion for sport or competition, there is controversy. One of the dog owners actually accuses others of jacking up their puppy on meds. "Juiced, whacked like the local crackhead," the enthusiast rants in the midst of a sour-grapes interview after a race.

"We took stuff out, we didn't want it to be all about the controversy," says MacDougall. "I'm pretty sure, no matter what the sport is you're going to have scandal and lies. I'm sure there are stamp collecting scandals."

Controversy carried right over into the film's genesis, when the single major sponsor of wiener dog racing, Wienerschnitzel Restaurants, refused to participate in the making of Wiener Takes All. The film begins with over a minute of legal disclaimer that makes the point, and the Wienerschnitzel mascot, a giant sausage, seen throughout the film, is creatively censored. "They invited me for a party the first night, and we taped a couple of the executives drinking and they said some funny stuff," says MacDougall. "I think they might have been spooked by that. It became kind of adversarial, and I didn't want that kind of relationship. But I also didn't want to have to go through and blur out the logo, which is everywhere."

MacDougall credits his wife for spurring him on to complete the film, which he'll be promoting here this week at the festival. He says that one day they'd like to have a dog of their own to join their four cats, and would certainly consider going with a wiener. "Those dogs are in my heart forever. They are such a loyal, fun

breed. When we finally get a house, I want a dog...if I ever get a place in the country, in the Annapolis Valley, maybe, sure."

Wiener Takes All: A Dogumentary, September 16 at Park Lane, 12pm, \$11, 422-6965, atlanticfilm.com.

Carsten Knox's poodle-cross Ziggy would like to challenge any fleet-of-foot dachshunds to a race on the Common anytime it suits them.